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ABSTRACT

Six conceptions prevail about the language experience approach (LEA) although research and practical experience have proven them false. (1) "LEA does not teach basic skills." If basic skills are defined as communication competence, LEA teaches basic communication skills as well as the mechanics of communication. (2) "A language experience classroom is undisciplined, instruction is poorly organized, and learning is by chance." The language experience classroom teaches children to trust themselves to monitor their own behavior, to be responsible for themselves, and to be self-disciplined. The classroom is highly organized because it forces the teacher to organize and structure, to think about what he or she is doing, and why. (3) "Language experience is for primary grade students only." Language experience is not a static approach. It stimulates a perceptual growth and is suitable for all ages. (4) "Language experience limits the learning of language arts and reading skills." Language experience stimulates the growth of language arts and reading skills through practical and purposeful use. (5) "LEA contributes to poor reading habits." Language experience teaches children how to master reading as a process, and helps create independent, autonomous readers. (6) "Language experience can only be taught by experienced teachers." While this approach is not for every teacher, it is not limited to experienced teachers. (HTH)

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Language Experience...Fiction and Fact

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Language Experience...Fiction and Fact

During my years as a language experience teacher, and as I have worked with preservice and inservice teachers, I consistently encounter a wall of fiction surrounding language experience as an approach to teaching communication skills. As a public rebuttal, I am going to focus on six of the most prevalent misconceptions about language experience and expose them to the facts of research and practical experience. I believe it is time that those of us who are dedicated to the Language Experience Approach start saying, "That isn't so, let me tell you how it really is." We need to educate those around us who firmly believe that rote drill, ditto worksheets, workbook exercises and skills taught in isolation are THE BEST WAY to teach communication skills. Now is the time to create an island of common sense in a sea of confusion that spouts catch phrases such as: student learning objectives; time on task analysis; basic skills; standardized testing for basic competencies; and norm referenced tests.

Fiction Number One: LEA Doesn't Teach Basic Skills

Well, that of course, depends upon how one defines basic skills. If, by basic skills, we mean communicative competence, that is, knowing how to communicate effectively according to purpose, participants and situation, then the criticism is fiction. Communication skills, skills that are necessary for self expression, informing, persuading, entertaining and questioning, are skills that cannot be taught in isolation. They are learned through interacting with people. It is a quantum leap

from filling in blanks in workbooks and worksheets (where the only audience is the teacher or whoever will grade the assignment) to interacting in real life situations with living people who have varying needs and points of view.

Markova, in her research in Russian schools writes:

> WE must learn how to design the process of instruction in such a way that the child not only perceives the established goals of education but also learns how to set short-term and long term goals for herself on the basis of the tasks entailed by the kinds of activity which she is about to pursue, while subordinating these tasks to her own cognitive activity. IT IS OUR CONTENTION THAT WE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROCESSES OF GOAL FORMATION IF WHAT THE SCHOOL CHILD OR YOUTH LEARNS IS THE TASKS, METHODS, AND MEANS AND DEVICES OF THE ACTUAL KINDS OF SOCIAL ACTIVITY IN WHICH SHE CAN EXPECT TO ENGAGE LATER IN LIFE. (Markova, 1979, emphasis mine.)

In her review of literature, research design and analysis of results in Teaching the Mastery of Language, Markova consistently focuses on the child as an initiator, the child as a partner in decision making, the child as an active learner in a social setting.

Lev Vygotsky drew the following conclusions both from his research and his analysis of other research conducted in Germany, Italy and England:

> Teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something. If they are used only to write official greetings to the staff or whatever the teacher thinks up (and clearly suggests to them), then the exercise will be purely mechanical and may soon bore the child; his activity will not manifest in his writing... Reading and writing must be something the child needs. Writing must be relevant to life. (Vygotsky, 1978)

But in our legislated world, we hear, "What about the REAL basic skills? Kids can't write so an educated person can read what is written! These kids need drill and practice with worksheets!"

We would all agree that the correct use of conventions and mechanics clarify written expression. For example, punctuation represents and amalgamation of discreet skills (apostrophes, periods, quotation marks, exclamation marks) that help organize writing into comprehensible units. Certainly, any of us who have taught from language arts texts have spent hours teaching punctuation. But do these texts provide more experiences with the use of punctuation than can be offered in a language experience program or in any similarly process centered classroom? The March, 1983 issue of Language Arts contains a report on research conducted in a first grade classroom that teaches writing by having the children write (in other words, a process based program). The research team found,

> ...given the encouragement to write in a process-centered classroom, these first grade children gave themselves more opportunities for punctuation than language arts texts (or even ditto worksheets) are likely to provide: 5,997 sentences, or 272 per child, which include 327 possessive nouns and 259 direct quotations. (Cordeiro, Giacobbe and Cazden, 1983)

Through the process of writing, children generated plentiful opportunities for learning the use of apostrophes, periods, quotation marks and exclamation marks as well as other basic skills.

Fiction: LEA Doesn't Teach Basic Skills.

Fact: LEA Teaches Basic Communication Skills As Well As The Mechanics Of Communication

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Fiction: Number Two: A Language Experience Classroom Is Undisciplined, Instruction Is Poorly Organized And Learning Is By Chance.

As a criticism of an individual teacher attempting to teach language experience, this may be true. But that is not the nature of language experience. In an LEA classroom, there is constant emphasis on individual responsibility, on respect for both individual rights and the rights of the classroom community. Students' ideas and languages are respected as valued expressions. Problem solving abilities form the basis of discipline as students participate in decision making. When one infringes upon the rights of the group, one is out of line and must alter his/her behavior. Rather than the teacher imposing rules and regulations on the students, students are responsible for maintaining respectful, orderly behavior. They know why rules exist, because they were responsible for formulating and sustaining those rules. Responsible behavior has a clearly known purpose.

At the beginning of each year, my first graders made their own rules for behavior. Although it sometimes stretched my patience, these rules were formulated as a consequence of teacher-guidance and student identified need. For example, on the first day of school everyone wanted to talk with me. I would say, "I would like to talk with you, too, but there is so much noise and so many people are talking at once,

I can't hear you. What can we do?" The children would generate a class rule ("We will take turns. We won't yell around.") and I would write that rule on chart paper. It was not always easy to follow this procedure, but my mother (who first taught language experience in the 1920's) always encouraged me. In her life time of teaching and based on her experience as a principal, she had learned that children will act more responsibly if they are active participants in structuring a classroom. With the inherent respect evidenced by having children express themselves, using their own language, their own experiences in writing books combined with the respect and trust of involving children in decision making, chaos and lack of discipline rarely exist.

Just as there is discipline in the LEA classroom, so is there highly organized instruction. Since there are no LEA teachers' manuals, the teacher herself must know what is going to be taught and how she is going to teach that "what". She must provide her own lesson-by-lesson structure rather than depending upon a manual to do so. It isn't easy to relinquish that manual, but it does force you to know exactly what you are doing.

I was teaching a workshop on LEA in a small school district, and I asked the teachers which reading skills they taught at their grade level. Surprised stares. I said, "Surely you know which word recognition skills you teach, don't you?" Surprise stares turned to alarmed stares. I began to feel a bit desperate and said, "Well, how do you know what you are supposed to be teaching?" A sign of relief whispered through the

room, "Oh, we just teach what is in the teacher's manual." If we could trust teacher's manuals to be the best resource for teaching, there could be some hope for the teachers and the children; but research tells us that teacher's manuals are not always our best resource. According to a research project in which I was involved, 85% of the teacher's manual based questions required and received one to five word literal responses. (Hansen-Krening, Gonzales, 1981) Durkin's research does little to relieve this gloomy picture. (Durkin, 1981) And Sirotnik found that, in a study involving 129 elementary classrooms, "... less than 1% of instructional time is devoted to open questions which call for more complex cognitive or affective responses." (Sirotnik, 1983) Clearly, teachers must break away from dependence upon most commercially published texts if they are to develop thinking and problem solving abilities in their students. Equally clearly, language experience teachers do this; they have no option, for to know nothing is to teach nothing.

Fiction: A Language Experience Classroom Is Undisciplined, Learning Is Poorly Organized, And Learning Is By Chance.

Fact: A Language Experience Classroom Teaches Children To Trust Themselves To Monitor Their Own Behavior, To Be Responsible For Themselves, To Be Self Disciplined.

A Language Experience Classroom Is Highly Organized Because It Forces The Teacher To Organize And Structure, To Think About What She Is Doing, And Why She Is Doing It.

Fiction Number Three: Language Experience Is For Primary Grade Students Only.

Both Russell Stauffer (in The Language Experience Approach to the Teaching of Reading) and MaryAnne Hall (The Language Experience Approach For Teaching Reading) report research on the successful use of LEA with multi-ages as well as with children with special needs. (This latter population includes second language learners, special education children and remedial reading children.) Language experience is useful with all ages of students because it avoids discontinuity between written text and the language and experiences of all students, Stauffer writes,

> Whenever the cognitive, affective and cultural wealth of children is used as a base for instruction, solid achievement is likely to result. Instruction, in capitalizing on this rich resource is also adapted to the level of the learner. The entire instruction-learning process utilizes an individual's thoughts, interests, and ambitions... the LEA method resembles the Socratic method, with its painstaking and systematic development of thought through inquiry from early childhood to adulthood. The mind and heart of the individual are engaged in actions on things and on ideas, and this is what is vital. (Stauffer, 1980)

Students grow because there is no ceiling on their learning. The gifted child can explore the upper limits of ability. Slower children can progress at their own pace with SUCCESS. Second language learners learn their second language within the context of daily use.

I think that one reason some people have relagated LEA to the primary grades is that they conceive of it as a static approach. They fail to recognize that a language learning environment is both fluid and rich. As experiences broaden the student's world view, semantic options grow.

The teacher plays a pivotal role here for she provides challenges that stimulate students' thinking. Teachers provide new and/or broader experiences through literature, the media, as well as through providing opportunities to explore factual information contained in science, social studies, anthropology, history, and other examples of expository writing. For example, all students, but older students in particular, need to approach reading in the content area from the viewpoint of the author. They need to experience the planning and organization of expository writing. They need to be involved in selecting important information, in deleting extraneous information, in presenting the most salient information in an understandable and memorable fashion. By these thoughtful experiences, they can apply critical reading abilities to commercially published texts used in the content areas. They can bring an analytical approach to reading and analyzing standardized tests. Through their own writing, through sharing materials written by peer authors, students of all ages learn how (even in nonfiction) point of view influences what one chooses to say, read or write. They also learn that some nonfiction is difficult to read because it is poorly written. All of these learning experiences develop a meta-awareness, an objective, powerful approach to reading that many adults never achieve.

Fiction: Language Experience Is For Primary Grade Students Only.

Fact: Language Experience Is Not Static, It Stimulates A Perpectual Growth, It Is For All Ages.

Fiction Number Four: Language Experience Limits The Learning Of Language Arts And Reading Skills.

Preceding information dispels much of this fiction. However, one issue remains unanswered. If students are using their own language and their own experiences in listening, speaking, reading and writing, doesn't that limit the growth of syntactic and semantic complexity? Won't their vocabulary be stinted? If there is no controlled repetition of words, how will a sight word vocabulary be established?

Again, the basic assumption of this piece of fiction is that language experience teacher is dormant! LEA teachers know that we are constantly committed to planning new experiences that will expand vocabularies, that will stimulate semantic, and syntactic growth. Sight word vocabularies will be established because basic sight words are those frequently encountered both in reading and writing. They are words that glue sentences together in again, both reading and writing. These glue words are as utilitarian for student writers as they are for commercial writers. For example, a third grader wrote,

> Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a planet called Arms. They called the planet that because everybody was strong except the prince and his family and their power came from their minds. (Michael White, third grade)

Michael used a total of 36 words, 25 of those are on the Dolch word list. Disregard, if you can, the sophistication of thought and concentrate on the use of high frequency words, it becomes evident that children will encounter those words in their own writing. A first grader dictated this story.

> This is my family. This is my mom and my dad. We are eating pizza. I love pizza. (Keith, first grade)

Keith used a total of 18 words, 12 of them are on the Dolch word list. Regardless of grade level, sophistication of thought, groups of verbs nouns, articles and prepositions recurr consistently enough that writing (and then reading) without them seems impossible.

For his doctoral dissertation, Messerschmidt studied three hundred and eighty-two second through ninth grade students who had been identified as having reading deficiencies. As an experiment, one group of students was involved in a language experience program. At the end of the treatment period, 84% of the language experience group showed significant gains in both vocabulary and comprehension. (Messerschmidt, 1977)

Cohen described a case study on the implementation of a language experience classroom in an elementary school. She found that, at the end of the year, reading test scores showed greater gains for the experimental, LEA classroom when the scores of those children were compared with scores from the previous year. In the same study, Cohen analyzed compositions written by second and third grade LEA students as well as compositions written by fourth graders from the same school. The LEA second and third graders wrote syntactically more mature sentences than the nonLEA fourth graders. (Cohen, 1976)

Markova's research with older students clearly demonstrated that the contextual, purposeful use of language in writing and speaking stimulates significant growth in coherence and complexity.(Markova, 1978)

Fiction: Language Experience Limits The Learning Of Language Arts And Reading Skills.

Fact: Language Experience Stimulates The Growth Of Language Arts And Reading Skills Through Purposeful Use.

Fiction Number Five: Language Experience Contributes To Poor Reading Habits.

The origin of this fiction is understandable. I think it stems from, "You can't use LEA in a classroom with 20-30 students! I mean, really, if you are working with one student, what is happening with the rest of the kids. If you don't have reading groups, you can't introduce new words, you can't make sure that the children are reading correctly. You just don't have enough control over reading."

If immediate feedback constitutes an overriding concern, let's turn to research in the schools to determine just how often immediate feedback occurs in some traditional classrooms. Sirotnik found, "In the elementary classes observed, we estimate that, on the average, just under 3 percent of the instructional time that the teacher spent interacting with students involved corrective feedback (with or without guidance)." (Sirotnik, 1983)

I decided to ask children in a third grade language experience class what they do when they encounter an unknown word.

> Nancy: You don't have reading groups with Mrs. Kielman. So, what do you do when you're reading and Mrs. Kielman's busy and can't help? What do you do when there's a word you don't know?

Travis: Yeh, well, you can put them together, like if there's five words in there, then you can put them together. Cause if you already know those words, you can probably put them together. Like if it's "r" and "ing" you put it together and it's a word. It's ring.

Nancy: Yes, I guess if you said, "He had a _____ and you knew it started with a 'rrr' sound, you could kind of guess it was ring.

Jeff: And also, you could tell by, you could, "He has a _____" and then you could skip it. "He has a blank and can use it for protection." So what does, um, see in that sentence... Um, you could see the sentence. You can tell the word is by just reading that sentence and figuring out what goes there.

Travis: But you know that it starts with an "r" and you know it's "ring". You sound it out as "ring".

Jeff: So, um, Mrs. Kielman doesn't have to help us all the time. We can do it.

Both of these boys are independent readers, because they are using phonics and context to develop autonomy. They have conceptualized the fact that the purpose of phonics and the purpose of context clues is to facilitate reading. Success and making sense of reading provides immediate feedback for them.

Fiction: Language Experience Contributes To Poor Reading Habits.

Fact: Language Experience Teaches Children How To Master Reading As A Process. It Helps Create Independent, Autonomous Readers.

Fiction Number Six: Language Experience Can Only Be Taught By Experienced Teachers.

At one time I perpetuated that fiction. In my many years with language experience, I have met so much resistance to its wide use, I

began to make-up reasons for that resistance. None of them really seemed to make much sense to me, so I agreed with the most easily rationalized argument. After all, LEA requires patience, it demands that one trust and respect students, it necessitates knowing skills that children need to learn, it is based upon an acceptance that language and knowledge grow through experience rather than through drill and route memorization. I guess it was easier to accept the idea that these basic requirements were more Herculean for novice teachers than for experienced teachers. Anyway, it was a disclaimer I used in admitting that language experience certainly isn't for everyone. I had a day of reckoning. A first year teacher had the audacity to not only go into her first classroom and do a smashing job of teaching language experience, she also had the herve to later enroll in my graduate classes. I think she did so with the sole purpose of lying in ambush, just waiting for my disclaimer. When she heard it, she bushwhacked me. She told of her complete success and joy with language experience (although she would say her students' success and joy).

Fiction: Language Experience Can Only Be Taught By Experienced Teachers.
Fact: Language Experience Is Not Limited To Experienced Teachers.

When I think about the people I know who have taught and still teach through this approach, I realize that it isn't necessary to make any qualifying statements about who can and can't teach language experience. Only

individuals can make that decision. But when that decision is made, it should be based on fact, not on fiction.

The alternative is an intellectually, professionally and philosophically unacceptable abdication of a common sense approach to developing communication competence. We cannot allow the lay public or political opportunists to force us into disengaging children from a learning environment where they develop the thoughtful, powerful use of language. We, as highly trained educators should use our language and our experience in the continuing process of public education.

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